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ABSTRACT

This speech by the education advocate of the National Urban League outlines the involvement of that organization in the national struggle for quality educational opportunities for black Americans. The history of black education is discussed, from dual "separate but equal" school systems to the Brown decision to current census data that show the historic gap between black and white median educational levels closing at an ever increasing rate. The education division, always an important part of the agenda of the Urban League, initially focused on needs related to enhancing employment opportunities. Current concerns include the need for guidance counseling, dropout prevention, minimum standards, basic skills, especially language acquisition, and the importance of school finance issues. Data gleaned from the Street Academies program, an alternative urban school movement which helps dropouts achieve diplomas, document the need for early action toward these issues. As education advocate, the speaker coordinates the activities of local affiliates in order to achieve a meaningful relationship between their direct service programs and the movement's advocacy role. Her present concern is that the "back to basics" movement is a code word for tracking. (KR)

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S P E E C H

G I V E N B Y

CAROL GIBSON
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

BEFORE

CONTROL DATA CORPORATION'S

TWO DAY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS' SEMINAR

HELD AT

CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS
8100 34th AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

DECEMBER 1, 1977

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I am delighted that Control Data has provided the National Urban League with this opportunity to share our educational concerns with this distinguished group of school superintendents.

For generations Black Americans, quite universally, have had unswerving total faith in the positive effects of education per se. Our historical struggle for full participation in an "open society" can be traced by exploring the parameters of our struggles for Education.

The Atlanta Compromise, which can be called our basic plea for education, became formalized as "separate but equal" systems. You see we thought access was sufficient. Years and years of frustrated disappointments forced us to seek legal recourse and finally in 1954 the Supreme Court decreed that separate but equal was not in fact equal. Thereafter, dual public school systems were ended. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed, "The life of the law has been experience not logic." In the almost twenty-five years since Brown, we have found that unitary, non-segregated school systems still have not provided the definitive answer.

Over the last twenty plus years, the educational problems of Black children have been discussed almost exclusively within the constraints of the integration-desegregation context. In the process, the real problems of our public schools have become blurred by the controversy which is a reflection of the schizophrenic racist nature of our society. Many, including professional educators view

integration as an ideology, a credo invested with sufficient substance to solve the educational problems of Black children. While we must never allow the basic victories of the fifties, in particular, the Brown Decision, to be negated, the immediate educational aspirations and actual achievements of Blacks must be optimized, not only with regard to our constitutional rights, but also with respect for the very real and complex needs of our futuristic society.

The 1970 census revealed interesting gains for Blacks in an absolute sense. Among all Blacks, educational attainment nearly doubled since 1940, from 5.7 years of schooling to 10.3 years in 1970. On a relative basis, the historic gap between black and white levels has closed to a moderate degree. The 1970 data further indicate that the gap is closing much faster at younger age levels. Among whites aged 20-21, the median educational attainment level is 12.8 years. For Blacks in the same age range it is 12.4 years, or less than a six month differential. The decrease in the gap between the educational attainment levels of Blacks and whites (particularly in the 20-21 age group), is given proof that the strong historic belief which Blacks have invested in the importance of education has been firmly transmitted to our young. To enhance, to capitalize on, and to protect this aspect of the Black American cultural heritage, the Urban League has developed and is pursuing a stronger and a broader advocacy role in education.

Based on our continuing analysis of census data, we found that

in 1970, fifteen percent of the forty-five million public school students in this country were Black, and that fifty-two percent of all Black public school students in the country in grades K-12 are enrolled in public school systems located in communities where there is an Urban League. Thus, the demographic distribution of our nation-wide network of affiliates provides substantive evidence that as a movement the Urban League is in a position to provide leadership in the national struggle for quality educational opportunities for Black Americans.

From a purely historical point of view, when you examine the 66 years of the Urban League movement, it is clear that education has always been an important part of our agenda. Initially, the Urban League movement began around the issue of employment/jobs in the north for southern Black migrants. As Leagues secured employment for newcomers to the north, the need to provide ancillary services - such as housing, health care, etc. for total familes was recognized. Such services were provided and were perceived of as support programs - or, in good social work parlance, - to strengthen employment opportunities. In the 1920's and the 1930's education as an NUL program area was completely focused on needs related to the work setting. Classes to prepare migrants to fill out job applications, to take tests, etc. were initiated. In the 1930's, there developed a recognition that Black students in public schools were not receiving adequate - if any - guidance assistance in

planning for college or in understanding the existant employment opportunities for Blacks. During this period, career opportunity programs became part of the Urban League's agenda.

To quote from one of our early publications, Ever Widening Horizons:

"The Industrial Relations Department of the National Urban League senses vocational variation as an essential step in our occupational advancement," Mr. Hill wrote in the March, 1930 issue of Opportunity, which was then the official organ of the League. "It will loom up in the League's program with increased emphasis as a main feature toward which the national organization and its various locals will address its best efforts. It will be an important part of the 'Vocational Opportunity Campaign' which will be celebrated April 20th to 27th in a nationwide effort by the National Urban League."

The first Vocational Opportunity Campaign, an intensive week-long program, was planned for the spring of 1930 to tackle head-on the problem of jobs for Negroes and to make both the Negro and white world more vocationally minded where Negroes were concerned. With the aid of the local Urban Leagues and as many other social agencies as could be persuaded to cooperte, special steering committees were set up in fifty cities. Meetings of employers, unions, and employment seekers were planned at which literature was distributed and prominent speakers addressed the respective

groups to make employers aware of the Negro's talents, skills, and progress, and to make Negroes aware of the additional training they must acquire in order to compete for employment. Young people were approached through their schools. Speakers addressed assemblies in an effort to raise hopes and give information about job opportunities; vocational guidance specialists met with teachers.

The second Vocational Opportunity Campaign, April 19th to 26th, 1931, was conducted under the auspices of local Urban Leagues, where they existed, and with the aid of other social agencies where no League was in operation. At every kind of public meeting that could be contrived or invaded - indoor, outdoor, luncheons, forums, lodges, literary societies, board meetings, churches - social workers, educators and public spirited citizens pleaded with men and women, boys and girls, Negro and white, skilled and unskilled, preacher, teacher, doctor, lawyer, to give serious thought to the vocational problems of Negroes. The national office sent out an explanatory circular, "Vocational Mindedness", and followed it up with a revised edition of its twelve-page booklet, "Negro Workers - A Drama of 5,000,000 American Wage Earners," which gave a careful analysis of the Negro's gains and losses in industry, his work needs and ambitions, and recommended approaches which both he and the white world could make toward a solution of the situation. To young people still in school the National Urban League sent its leaflet: "Graduation - Then What?" To school authorities it sent: "Choosing a Vocation," suggesting program helps in guiding young people.

So it is clear that the National Urban League's Education Division has long been involved as partners with public school systems and business to respond to the total educational needs and concerns of our constitutents. "Stay in School!" advised one of our 1930's pamphlets addressed to high school levels. "More education means more dollars. More education will help you to live a more complete life socially, culturally, economically and politically, and will give you more personal satisfaction. It will add to your job security and assure you of a wider choice of jobs. It means that America will be better served because you are more conscious of and better able to assume your responsibilities as a citizen of a great democracy." It does seem clear that the more things change - the more they stay the same.

From the perspective of the National Urban League, contemporary critical educational issues are varied and innumerable. As the Director of Education of the National Urban League, let me hasten to assure you that education remains a priority of the League as a movement; education is a priority programmatic concern of the vast majority of the 109 Urban League affiliates across the nation and the efforts of the Education Division does have the full committed support and confidence of Vernon Jordan.

I would like now to let you hear Mr. Jordan state that commitment for himself. (Video tape of Vernon E. Jordan).

Vernon has clearly stated that advocacy is one of the main thrusts of the Urban League's education program, and I am here today because of our advocacy efforts, and to make it perfectly clear that the League is concerned with the total educational process not just job training .

Since I am here today as the Education Advocate of the National Urban League, I would like to share some definitions with you.

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY: Holding local public school systems accountable for providing all students with a thorough and efficient education. (I refer you to New Jersey for a working definition of t & e).

The advocate is not objective. The advocate automatically believes that there is something wrong with the system not with the child. The advocate does not simply believe this because of impromtu thinking. The advocate believes this because of the writings of Ryan in Blaming the Victim, Poalo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Bernard C. Watson in In Spite of the System. The Urban League advocate futhermore knows this because of the more than twelve years experience with the Street Academy. And it is this experience specifically upon which we base most of our advocacy positions. We are particularly concerned with: guidance counselling; language acquisition; drop-out prevention; minimum standards, basic skills, and school finance issues.

In 1965, the Urban League movement initiated the alternative school movement in urban centers in a program called Street Academy. The Street Academies worked with street wise high school dropouts and successfully helped over 95% of our enrollees to achieve their high school diplomas and over 80% of this group to go on to have meaningful post secondary experiences. In July of this year, we concluded a five year longitudinal study of three Street Academies working with and finally being adopted by their respective local school systems (South Bend, Indiana; Washington, D.C.; and Oakland, California). As a result of this particular experience - utilizing anthropological methodology - we documented among many factors the essential characteristics of the Street Academy student. As a result of this data, it has become clear to us that students who dropout of high school exhibit signs of such behavior as early as the 5th or 6th grade. Therefore, dropout prevention programs - if they are to be successful - ought to be initiated at least in middle schools years, not in high school. This then is one of the League's basic educational advocacy positions.

Another of our concerns which is based on data collected from our Street Academy students over the past twelve years is a concern about guidance counselling services. This concern has many facets:

1. In general, in the best of times, counselling services are too limited in scope. Inner city <u>elementary</u> school students must be exposed to career guidance services beginning at least at the fourth grade level. We are

talking here about meaningful group and/or individual exposure to persons who are well trained guidance counselors - not just class trips to visit local industry or businesses - or sessions with teachers - who become discontented with classroom duties and are then promoted to "guidance counselors" status.

2 During these, the worst of times, the fiscal dismantling of urban school systems, counselling departments have often been the most vunerable support services and are often the first service to be red pencilled.

The National Urban League is firmly committed to being advocates for the maintainence and,in fact,most often the establishment of quality guidance counselling (career and motivational in nature) services for all urban school systems specifically at the elementary school level.

Perhaps the most significant task that I have is the coordination of the activities of local affiliates to achieve a meaningful relationship between their direct service program activities and the movement's advocacy role. The concerns and priorities at the local level parallel with the wide range of educational issues which are of major concern to the Black community and which were responded to in a survey of all Urban League affiliates which was conducted with the assistance of the

University of Pittsburgh. Examples of such activities are as follows:

A - School Desegregation

The Urban Leagues of Onondaga (Syracuse), San Diego, Rochester, Louisville, Columbus, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington, have each provided leadership in developing strategies to bring an end to the racial isolation which continues to exist in their local public schools. In some instances, notably Seattle and Columbus, the League has been in the forefront in developing and submitting a school desegregation plan. Rochester's leadership was provided via a definitive study of the effects of racial imbalance in their public schools. In May 1977, the Syracuse public school system was ordered by the New York State Commissioner of Education to end racial isolation as a direct consequence of the advocacy initiative of the local Urban League.

B - Student Achievement

New Haven, Connecticut; Portland, Oregon; Tacoma, Washington; Washington, D.C.; San Francisco, California; and Flint, Michigan have been particularly resourceful in developing direct service programs to help students increase their performance on various standardized test.

C - Career Counseling

Dayton, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Portland, Oregon; Greenville, South Carolina; Denver, Colorado; and Los Angeles, California are a few of the affiliates which have outstanding programs to supplement

the career counseling offered by their local school systems. Each affiliate also places emphasis on motivational counseling and the dissemination of information about non-traditional jobs and occupations.

D - Alternative Schools

Urban Leagues in many cities continue to operate either the traditional Street Academy or have carved out certain aspects of the alternative learning environment strategies and adapted them to other programs. Such affiliates as New Orleans, Flint, and Minneapolis have successfully operated a Street Academy Program for several years, each utilizing funding and programmatic strategies appropriate to their needs, while affiliates such as Baltimore, St. Paul, Hartford, and New York City have either modified Street Academy Programs or played a significant role in monitoring alternative programs operated by their local school systems.

E - Parent Advocacy

Working to help parents increase their knowledge of their rights as educational consumers has been a traditional Urban League approach to addressing local educational concerns. Affiliates in such diverse locations as Canton, Ohio; Springfield, Illinois; Wichita, Kansas; Kansas City, Missouri; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Pittsburgh, Pa. have found that developing programs to increase participation with the LEA is one of the most effective strategies to improve the quality of the educational program in their school systems.

F - School Violence; School Discipline

In response to the national concern over school violence/school discipline, the Education Division with the assistance of the Urban League affiliates is documenting the incidence of school violence in Urban League affiliate's school system and determining the effectiveness of school discipline codes. We are trying to ensure that this problem is addressed in a manner which is not only corrective and preventive, holistic and reinforcing of the principles necessary to provide positi learning environments as opposed to the establishment and maintainance of "discipline corridors" in our urban public school system.

G - School Finance

The Spring 1973 Supreme Court Decision in regards to Rodriguez has been characterized by law professor John E. Coons as "legitimatizing the historic triune pattern" of public education.

1. Choice and excellence for the rich who can elect either to reside in a rich district or to buy a private education.
2. Excellence but no choice for the family of average wealth or less, living in property-rich districts.
3. Educational deprivation without choice for the average family in property poor districts.

Until school dollars begin to flow in a more equitable manner, it will be difficult to improve the quality of education throughout this country. For this reason, one of the most substantive issues for educational advocacy for the League is school finance.

H - Performance Level/Minimum Standards

Differences in the average performance levels of social class or racial groups must cease to exist. Public policy must be directed toward their elimination. The League is also quite concerned about minimum standards for students and the "back to basics" movement. We firmly support minimum standards for students - but only to the extent that a given system, institutes minimum standards of teaching for teachers, and minimum standards of administration for administrators. Students should be failed if they do not learn but quite assuredly teachers who consisently fail to teach should be failed, administrators who cannot provide the environment which support teachers who teach also must be failed. Any system which institutes such a trilateral system of accountability for teachers, administrators and students will have the firm unswervering support of the National Urban League.

Let me now share a few lines from a book I mentioned earlier: In Spite of the System, by Bernard C. Watson:

"It seems that where significant improvements in public education occur or are possible, all depends in large measure on what teachers, counselors, administrators , power professionals and others find it possible to do within the context of the system, however it is organized. Even if it were possible to conduct a detailed and sophisticated analysis of institutions and key individuals, the results would probably not lead to a grand design or formula to revolutionize

public education and solve its persistent problems. But neither has anything else to my knowledge. We could obviously learn more and prescribe better if all the data is available. How much more and how much better I am not sure. It may be that the individual is most important , his or her goal, commitment, skill and persistense."

We are concerned about the Back to Basics movement. We are concerned with its amorphous definitions. What are basic skill requirements in 1977? Back to Basics suggests a return to a methodology of yesteryear which was designed to prepare folks for yesteryear. Is the Back to Basics movement a new code word for tracking? When folks say Back to Basics, are they thinking of the 3 R's: Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic - or are they thinking of the 3 S's: Selecting, Screening and Sorting?

In 1931, W.E.B. DuBois said:

"The end of education is neither the table or the phrase - it is the person. What kind of person are you training here? Are they people quickened in intellegence with some knowledge of the world they live in? Are they trained in such ways as to discover their true bent and ability, and to be intelligently guided to the choice of a life work? Then your system is right. Otherwise it was wrong."

June 1912

As we sit in this seminar for the next two days - let us consider this one single thought:

Today in kindergarten classes in every urban school system there are five year olds who trustingly and expectantly enrolled in school (per in your system) for the first time just two months ago. In the year 2001, the twenty-first century - these five year olds will be twenty-nine - at the age when they should be becoming the managers, leaders, principals, of their communities. Are our urban school systems equiped to prepare them to anticipate the challenges of the 21 century? Is yours?

W.E.B. DuBois said in 1931:

"We need to be certain that we do not simply think of technology to help us teach. We must be certain that we thoroughly educate our students so that they are able to take full advantage of and full control of the technology of the twenty-first century."

As a former language arts teacher and Assistant Principal of an Early Childhood Division, my own particular pet advocacy concern is related to solving the language acquisition problems of inner city children, and this has become a major concern of the National Urban League. Why can't Bobby read, write 'n spell? For years Black students who graduated from the "inferior" segregated schools in the south - exposed primarily to Black speech patterns - graduated from high school with competitive competencies in public english. What has happened? Why in 1977 should school textbook companies find it necessary to publish textbooks "in the Black vernacular?" The

Urban League is very concerned with the development of strategies for resolving the failure of the nation's schools to teach Black and other non-mainstream students the necessary language skills for survival in the United States. The League is concerned with the record of schools in teaching, reading, writing and "public" english to non-mainstream students in a way that will not ignore, denigrate or eradicate the rich language traditions, values and behaviors of the students. Black students must be taught language skills which will facilitate access to a full range of economic, political and social opportunities. This particular educational issue is one which the League is prepared to declare the priority educational concern. We would hope that you would be prepared to support us as we undertake this effort.

In conclusion, then, I would like to share with you some thoughts from Dr. Bernard C. Watson, Vice President, Academic Services, Temple University. In a National Urban Coalition publication entitled: Stupidity, Sloth, and Public Policy: Social Darwinism Rides Again, Dr. Watson has stated:

"The question, when all is said and done is not whether government can effectively intervene or whether schools make a difference. The evidence of history, unbiased observation and common sense is very clear: it is all a matter of expectations - and the power to see that expectations are met, thus when teachers are "expected" to teach, and children to learn, by and large they do. When a President "expects" NASA to put a man on the moon, it

. . .

does. And yet, despite the most amazing demonstrations of human ingenuity and inventiveness, it is still possible for some people to wring their hands and bemoan the intractability of certain problems."

It is my strong belief that we have come to this place together not to wring our hands - or to blindly reach out for panaceas - but to join hands in a thorough examination of policies, strategies and programs which respond to these problems.

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